



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Habakkuk Sermon

Habakkuk 1:1-11

“Habakkuk, or The Unconcern of God”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Again Father we are grateful to Thee for the privilege of study of Thy word and we ask Thy blessing upon us. Now as we turn to the Scriptures we pray that our study and the prophet Habakkuk may be fruitful and profitable for us and strengthen us in our Christian faith.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] This is the first of four studies in the prophecy of Habakkuk which we will be undertaking in the first hour of our Wednesday night Bible study. And the subject for tonight is “Habakkuk, or The Unconcern of God.”

One of the great issues that the prophecy of Habakkuk deals with is the problem of history. For a number of years, as many of you well know, one of the greatest problems that faced the biblical student and the Christian was the problem of the relationship of science and the Bible. I think for the years from 1850 to about 1950 that was probably the great problem with which Christians wrestled. It is still a problem but it probably has been replaced by other problems as the chief problem that faces us. The problem of history because of the world wars that we have experienced in this century

and the continuing tension that we have is probably an even greater problem. Many of our most outstanding scientists now grant that there is a supreme mind behind the universe. And what is even more important is that many of them grant that science in the final analysis is carried on in faith just as the study of Scriptures is carried on in faith.

Now, the Bible has the answer to the problem of history because it is not only the book of individual salvation it is also a book of universal salvation. It is a rather startling thing when you consider the problem of history in the light of the scriptures to remember that the Bible begins with the creation of the heavens and the earth. It does not begin with the creation of man. And so we should not be surprised and yet we are, I think, a little startled to realize that the Bible begins with the world and the conclusions which the Bible gives us to the problems of life touch ultimately the question of universal history. So the fact that the Bible starts with the creation of the world and not with the creation of man gives us a clue regarding the ultimate solutions to the problems of reality that are found in the scriptures.

E.T. Pearson said a long time ago and I think he borrowed it from someone else but I’ve forgotten from whom, “history is his story” and that certainly applies when we come to the question of the problem of history.

Habakkuk is an outstanding prophecy for two reasons. It provides the solution to the problem of individual salvation and its great text in chapter 2, verse 4 gives us a clue to that when he writes that “the righteous will live by his faith.” And then it also gives us great help in the solution to the problem of history. We are inclined to think that Habakkuk or perhaps Luther or perhaps Calvin one of these is the author of this great idea that men are justified by faith. And I did not, except by inadvertence, omit Paul. The real origin of the statement “the just shall live by faith” is found in Genesis chapter 15 in verse 6. And when you read the prophecy of Habakkuk in the Hebrew text and look at the terminology you realize that the prophecy of Habakkuk, in which he states, “the just shall live by faith,” contains an idea that he has borrowed from Genesis 15:6 when

Moses writes with reference to Abraham and his dealings with God and Abraham believed in the Lord and it was reckoned to him for righteousness, “the just shall live by faith.” And so we have Moses and then Habakkuk who argues on the basis of the Mosaic passage in Genesis 15:6. We have Paul who cites text three times. We have Augustine and Luther, who argue on the basis of that text, and all of these unite in the affirmation that a man comes to the knowledge of God and to the possession of a righteousness that is satisfactory to him on the basis of trust in the divine revelation concerning the Messiah. “The just shall live by faith.” So if Habakkuk only wrote that one text his prophecy would be a famous prophecy.

But there is something else in this great book. There is the solution to the problem of God’s dealings with the chosen people, his elect ones and his dealings with the non-elect. And we gain some clues here and we do in the first two chapters to the relationship that exists between God and the nation and the nations and the church. So Habakkuk then gives us the solution to the problem of individual salvation “the just shall live by faith” and he gives us great help in the solution of the problem of history in which we learn that God is really in control of the affairs of our lives.

Now if Habakkuk days seem draped with dark enigmas, someone has said, even more do our own. And we certainly need to look up and notice the divine solution to the problem of history because we are a part of it.

Let’s take our Bibles now and let’s turn to the prophecy of Habakkuk and I want to read first of all for the superscription of the book and this in the outline that I have on the overhead is Roman 1. We read the oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw. We do not know a great deal about the prophet Habakkuk. As a matter of fact, this little prophecy here written by him is all that we certainly about this man. His name comes from the Hebrew word *chabaq’quq* which means “to embrace,” and quite a bit has been made over that. Some have suggested he was a wrestler with God and that’s the force of the name and we are to think of him as such a person. Still others have arguing on the

basis of the meaning of the term have suggested that he is beloved by God or that he is a comforter of the people. And it has also been argued that he was a Levite because of the statements made in the third chapter and his familiarity with the worship of the people of Israel.

There are, as in the case of many of the prophets of the Old Testament and many of the Old Testament heroes who were not prophets, a number of traditions that have arisen concerning them. There is a legend that he carried pottage to Daniel when Cyrus put him in the lions den for a second time not recorder in Scripture. It is even suggested that he was the watchman who is referred to in Isaiah chapter 21 in verse 1, because here is chapter 2, verse 1, we read “I will stand on my guard post.” And still others have suggested that Habakkuk, for this is one of the traditions that Habakkuk was the son of the Shunammite woman whom Elijah restored to life in 2 Kings chapter 4. All of these are just traditions and of course do not give us any certain knowledge concerning the prophet. As far as the date of the prophecy is concerned again scholarship is somewhat divided over the precise location of the prophecy but most agree that Habakkuk was probably written during the reign of Jehoachim just before the Babylonians came and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. So that probably that from sometime between the years of 609 to 598 Habakkuk wrote his prophecy. He says in this first verse that it is an oracle or as the Hebrew puts a burden.

Now, I like that word which is found in the Hebrew text in a number of places in connection with messages of the word of God. It is a divine message, a burden, and it is derived from speech to God alone. It is something that God has laid upon the heart of the prophet.

Now, it seems to me that just speaking as a preacher of the word of God that this something that should characterize all ministry of the word of God. All who teach the word of God, not only those who stand on Sunday morning behind a pulpit and address an entire congregation, but all of you who stand in a Sunday school class and address

even little children or have classes in your home, child evangelism classes, any kind of ministry of the word of God should proceed from a conviction on the part of the teacher that he does have a burden that comes from the Lord. So I love these expressions and I don’t think this translation is quite as good as the thought of burden perhaps it’s more technically correct but the idea of burden is still there, the oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

Now, you usually do not see a burden but the reason that the term “see” is used is because it is a term that refers to prophetic ecstasy. Now, if you think that I am going to describe to you right now exactly what prophetic ecstasy is, you’re going to be greatly disappointed because I have never been in prophetic ecstasy. I haven’t the slightest idea of what it means to be in prophetic ecstasy. And I dare say that the chances are there are not any of you in this auditorium who have been. Now some of you who know my views concerning the gift of prophecy know that I do not even think that we have the gift of prophecy today. The gift of prophecy is a gift of conveying new revelations given by God that is the essence of a prophets teaching. So we do not have prophets today, therefore, we do not have anybody who knows anything about prophetic ecstasy. If we had one of the Old Testament prophets or if we had the Apostle John in the New Testament he speaks of himself as a prophet, Silas was a prophet, Agabus was a prophet, others in the New Testament were prophets, and then we would know what it means to see a burden.

Now, evidently in general in meant simply that God in his own unique way enabled the prophet, the man of God, to see what was going to transpire. He gave him a kind of view in which he saw things that were going to take place. He recognized it was supernatural and in fact it probably was its own authentication and the person who has been in prophetic ecstasy would probably say to you if you had a chance to speak to him, “I cannot explain it to you but I know this that if you are ever in it you will know that that’s it.” It’s like falling in love nobody can ever tell anyone else what falling in love

is like but if you have ever been in love than you say, “yes, that’s it and when it happens to you you’ll know it.” That’s what we used to tell our daughter when she would ask us “how do you know you’re in love?” Now this went on for a long period of time. We always answered her, “When it happens you’ll know” couldn’t tell her anything else. And when it happened, she knew. And now she is telling her children I’m sure. So the burden the Prophet Habakkuk saw.

Now, the second thing that I want to comment upon in connection with the nature of the Book of Habakkuk is not simply its character as a burden but its general content. This book is composed of a colloquy, a conversation between God and the prophet that’s what makes it unique. In the first two chapters as you will notice when you read it, it is a conversation that takes place between the prophet and the Lord. And then in the third chapter we have something like a theophany in which God appears to Habakkuk, and so the book is composed of a colloquy and a theophany between the prophet and the Lord.

One commentator has said it begins with a sob and ends with a song. It properly follows Nahum because Nahum is a prophecy in which there is judgment pronounced upon Assyria. And after Assyria passed off the world scene Babylon came on the world scene and the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which came into existence in 623 BC, so this book Habakkuk is placed properly in the book of the twelve prophet’s right after the prophecy of Nahum. It’s a minor prophet but it is one of the major ones of the minor prophets. If we were to outline it for our preaching purposes you might outline in two simple ways. We have a spiritual dialogue in the first two chapters and then a song of God’s intervention in history in the third chapter. In the first chapter faith is tested, in the second chapter faith is taught, and in the third chapter faith becomes triumphant.

Now let me say a word about the style of the prophet. I didn’t put that on the outline and I should have. I just plain overlooked it. Capital D after the C should be the style of the prophet. Now you cannot, most of you at least, read this book in Hebrew and so what you read is a translation. That’s unfortunate in one sense because the

Hebrew of the Book of Habakkuk is Hebrew that is characterized by a sublimity of utterance and expression and great dignity. And, furthermore, it has a great deal of vigor and animation. Habakkuk obviously was a man who was well able to handle that very difficult language. Someone has said he was a Jeremiah and an Asaph in one. Now, perhaps you can catch some of that if you read in the English text but this book is a book that is well written.

We look now, secondly, at the complaint of Habakkuk. And let’s read verses 2 thru 4. “How long, O Lord I call for help but thou will not hear. I cry out to thee, Violence.” Now do you think this book is contemporary? “I cry out to thee, violence.” If Amos is the prophet in an age of affluence, Habakkuk is a prophet for an age of violence and injustice on the part of professing people of God. “Yet thou does not save. Why dost thou make me see iniquity and cause me to look in wickedness? Yes destruction and violence are before me, strife exits and contention arises.” Therefore, the law is ignored or perhaps ineffective. The Hebrew word really means something like “is numbed” or “is cooled.” “Therefore, the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous therefore justice comes out perverted.”

Habakkuk’s complaint, the two key words are “how long” verse two and verse three “why.” He must have been a good theologian because he asked “why.” The difference between a Bible student and d theologian is that a Bible student studies the Bible and never asks “why.” The theologian studies the Bible and asks “why” and in this way constructs his own theology of the word of God unto the teaching of the spirit. The problem you see with Habakkuk is that as he looked out over the children of Israel and their conduct, the life of the times. And as he recognized that they were the elect people of God, people of the covenant, in spite of what he saw from the teaching of the word as he looked out over them all that he could see was injustice and violence and wickedness and iniquity. And justice has come out perverted, he says, and the law has been made

absolutely ineffective. So the problem is the silence, the inactivity, and the apparent unconcern of the Lord God.

Now, one thing I like about the Habakkuk is that he doesn’t take his complaints over to the professor of systematic theology at the theological seminary over in the city of Jerusalem and have a seminar on why evil exists in the world. He does the thing that everybody ought to do when in they are in difficulty in spiritual things. He takes his complaint to the Lord. So he says “How long O Lord will I call for help.”

Now, these words that he writes are, as you can see, are full of synonyms for wickedness. Now, these Hebrew synonyms suggest various types of evil activities, broils, litigations, oppression and one cannot help but think of the twentieth century and the kind of life that is characterized the western world which is supposedly a professing Christian world. We only have to think of the wickedness of Nazi Germany. We only have to think of wickedness of the other nations and the wickedness that exists in our own nation to realize that we have a situation that is in some ways parallel with the situation that Habakkuk saw. The difference is simply that we are not a covenant people. They were a covenanted people. They were an elect people but the same movement of the rise of wickedness existed then and we have a great deal of that today. The prophet then is concerned over “how long.”

Now, let’s read on and notice a few of the other things that he says. In the fourth verse, specifically, he speaks about the invalidation of Israel’s law. He says “Therefore the law is ignored. Wickedness numbs, wickedness cools the word of the Lord.” Now, what he is saying there is simply this that what has happened in the history of the nation and in the life of the nation as he looks at it is that this wickedness and this violence and this iniquity has made the law of Moses of no affect among them.

Now, he speaks in verse 4 of the law and justice. Now the Torah was the law for the whole of life and the *mishpat*, or justice, was the law of social relations, the legal decisions. And when he says the wicked surround the righteous he means circumvent the

righteous. That is, they circumvent the righteous in a sense that they prevent righteousness from existing in the nation.

Now, we again have the same kind of thing today with our own society because we have evil in high places which has made it impossible for the truth of God, it would seem, to prevail.

Now, at this point we could speak a whole lot about some of the evils of our present society but we do have to finish this prophecy and I’m sure that you yourself have recognized a great deal of what he is speaking about here.

Let me go on and look at the reply of Jehovah to him. Now, this reply is a revelation of divine activity. “Look among the nations Habakkuk” observe these are the words God addresses to the prophet and answers. They’re having this little conversation. Look among the nations, observe, be astonished, wonder. Incidentally, the Hebrew here is very vivid, “Astonish yourselves, be astonished” he says “Because I am doing something in your days you would not believe if you were told.” Now, it is foolish, Habakkuk, for you and the nation to trust in Egypt. It is foolish for you to run off for help in the problems of life. I am in control of things and I am going to do something that you would not believe if I were to tell you.

Now, have you noticed how the answer to the question of verse 2 is found right here. He had said in verse 2, “How long O Lord” and now in the third line of verse 5 he states, “Because I am doing something in your days.” “How long, just wait a little while Habakkuk. I’m going to do something in your day.”

Now, then he describes the divine activity and I want to just briefly go through verses 5 thru 11 making a few comments on it and then I want to conclude with the lessons that we learned from this opening part of the book. The description of the divine activity that is given in verse 6 through verse 11 “For behold I am raising up the Chaldeans.” Now, this is a vivid and very pictorial passage and it is proof of the greatness and inspiration of the prophet Habakkuk that he could describe in such a beautiful way

the activities of the Chaldeans of which we know a great deal in history. I am raising up the Chaldeans that fierce an impetuous people, the Authorized Version says that “bitter and hasty people.” Now the word hasty is translated impetuous in our new American Standard Version and I’m always reminded of Peter when I see something like impetuous or hasty or aggressive. It’s almost as if he is saying the nation of the Chaldeans is a nation of unconverted Peters.

Now, I would hate to have to deal with a nation of unconverted Peters. I have enough to deal with a converted Peter. But a nation of unconverted Peters that fierce and impetuous people surely this is the prophecy of something dreadful that is to come upon them. “For behold I am raising up the Chaldeans that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize to dwelling places which are not theirs.” The Chaldeans, the Babylonians, when they came had a habit of just fanning out over all of the territory and taking everything was in their way. They very seldom fought pitch battles, occasionally they did, but generally speaking they did not. He says they are dreaded and feared. Their justice and authority originate with themselves. In other words, they are autonomous people, they have no concern whatsoever about a God. Their authority originates within themselves, they are their own gods. “Their horses are swifter than leopards and keener wolves in the evening.”

This man is quite a writer. “The evening wolves, their horsemen come galloping, their horsemen come from afar, they fly like an eagle swooping down to devour. All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces moves forward. They collect captives like sand. They mock at kings and rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress and heap up rubble to capture it.” It was a well-known feature of their work of plundering that when they came to a high-walled city they didn’t try to break down the walls they just built giant mounds of ground so all they had to do was just walk up the ground and into the city. “Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on but they will be held guilty.” He states “They whose strength is their god.” He speaks about

Nebuchadnezzar because Nebuchadnezzar is the one who came and ultimately destroyed the city. So that “He whose might is his god” is referred to by him.

Now, when you turn over to the prophecy of Daniel in the 4th chapter and read about Nebuchadnezzar you find that this is exactly the kind of attitude that dominated Nebuchadnezzar. We read in Daniel chapter 4 in verse 30, the king reflected and said “Is this not Babylon the great which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?” It is almost as if Habakkuk knew ahead of time about Nebuchadnezzar. George Bernard Shaw’s *Superman* and Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* have nothing on the Babylonian as presented by the prophet Habakkuk.

Now let me conclude by drawing out some lessons from these opening versus. I have only three but I really want to draw out a few more because I think there are some important lessons here in these opening versus which I don’t want us to miss. You’ll notice, by the way, that he begins by saying “How long O Lord will I call for help and thou wilt not hear. I cry out to thee violence yet thou does not save. Why does thou make me see iniquity?”

Now, the primary reference of this, of course, is to the iniquity that existed in the land. But there is a great principle that applies to the individual here. Why does the Lord cause us to see iniquity? Well, often he causes us to see iniquity in order that we may thereby see the greatness of God. I think, as I have often said, every single one of us is born naturally a Pharisee and so we are very self righteous, all of us. Now, don’t look at me like that. I know that you were. We all are born as natural Pharisees. And then we are converted and most of us are half converted. That’s why we have the doctrine of sanctification.

Now, when we are converted, as I have often said, we still retain a little bit of the idea that, well, God has saved us that’s true but we have to do a little bit to keep ourselves saved. We have to do a little bit to be sure that we get to heaven. God does his part and we do ours. We often picture this under the term free will. We say “Yes

God does his part and we have our free will by which we make our decisions.” No one ever questions that we make decisions. The question is always what is the source or motivating power of our decisions. Is it of ourselves or is it of God? And all soundly converted people know that it is of God.

Now, when we are saved those things are all very hazy in our mind and we tend to be as a Christian person a person who needs to have that purified. I don’t want to use the term because you may think I am talking about another term but I don’t know how to do it any other way then to say that we are as Christians born as Armenians thinking that we have a little bit to do with it. And so again the Lord has to show us the fact that we cannot of ourselves control our wills. People often say well we need to make a decision of the will. Well, of course, I know that, that’s just my problem. My will does not act the way I want it to. It’s intractable. I say to my will I want you to act this way and I want you to be responsive to the word of God but my will of itself does not. It’s rebellious, it’s wicked, it’s evil, it wants to do what I want to do not what God wants to do. So the Lord has to give us another sight of ourselves. To put it in the language of the prophet, we need to go into the sanctuary.

Now, very few of us really naturally do that. We are dragged into the sanctuary by God most of us. But when we go into the sanctuary we are singing or talking and philosophizing about free will but when we come we are shouting free grace because we learn as Christians that our wills if they are not controlled by God shall never be controlled. And we learn from the word of God that God has promised to do just that. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you. Did you notice that, present tense? It is God who is working in you both to will and to do his good pleasure. It is God who works and transforms this wicked will by the doctrine of sanctification so that we come to the obedience that we desire and the Lord desires.

Now who gets credit for this, fifty percent God fifty percent man? No, it is altogether the work of God. Now when Habakkuk said here, “Why dost thou cause me to see iniquity?” Well he was, of course, speaking about iniquity on the public level and the lesson that we learn from our individual salvation and our individual sanctification is something that must be learned also on the national level, on the universal level. He caused Habakkuk to see iniquity and wickedness and violence in order that the nation, this covenanted of people, might learn that their success and their blessings rested in the sovereign power of a gracious God.

You know, the Puritans used to like to say that “God made a peacock’s feet black so that he might not be too proud of his feathers.” So he would look and his feathers and then look at his feet and see that they were black. And I think that is the way God does us, you know. He does work mightily in us through His grace but he reminds us constantly that we are just flesh.

Now, what are our lessons? Let me point them out very quickly. The first lesson that is obviously taught in these verses is take your problems to the Lord and I commented on that as we went through it. Habakkuk does not cry against God, he cries out to God. Now, when problems face us on the individual level or on the national level we don’t complain to others we complain to God. Take your problems first to the Lord. I love the way the prophet does that. He doesn’t run to some other prophet and asks for advice and counsel. Now, don’t misunderstand me. He didn’t run off to a Bill Gothard meeting either. He didn’t ask for an appointment with the pastor of the local church. He took his complaints to the Lord. That’s the first place to take all of our complaints. Tennyson has written, “Speak to him then, for he hears, and spirit with spirit can meet. Closer is he than breathing and nearer than hands or feet.”

Now, the second thing we learned here is that God’s ways are often mysterious. His inaction puzzles us, his answers come unexpected, his instruments are very unusual he uses the Chaldeans. John Newton had a great desire for deepening. He prayed

constantly that the Lord would deepen his experience with the Lord with himself and as a result, he was cast by God into such utter blackness that he thought for a time that he was under the control of Satan.

But by virtue of that experience he came to understand the Lord. His dealings with us are often mysterious. The Apostle Paul quotes this in Acts, chapter 13, the 5th verse, when he’s preaching in Antioch of Presidia and he says the same thing is going to happen to you that happened to Israel in the days of the Chaldeans. You know, the trouble with Israel was always that they would never believe the prophets. If they just believed the prophets but the never would. It’s like today. The trouble with most of us is we won’t believe the Bible, we really won’t believe it. So Paul warned them the same thing is going to happen to you that happened to Israel in the days of the Chaldeans. And so they listened to the Apostle Paul and they did nothing about it and just as the Chaldeans came in 605 and 586 so the Romans came in 70 A.D. and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and sent the Israelites to the four corners of the earth. God’s ways are mysterious.

Now his ways are often misunderstood and you’ll notice here that we have misunderstanding by the world too. The Chaldeans, they were God’s instruments but they didn’t understand what was happening. They came down and destroyed the children of Israel, performed a divine service moved by God, he worked in them to will and do his good pleasure, and what did they say? “The Lord Jehovah has been deigned to use us.” No. They said “Our strength is our God, have not I built this great palace.” So they didn’t understand even when they were used by God. His ways are often misunderstood. They are misunderstood by the religious. The Lord looked at Israel and said look, observe, be astonished, wonder they won’t understand and also his ways are misunderstood by even the spiritual people and the prophet Habakkuk has to go to God and say how long and why? So we learn that God’s ways are often misunderstood and the reason is we won’t pay attention to the word of God. That’s the fundamental reason

why we do not understand things. It was the case in the day of the flood. It was the case in the day in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is always the case.

Let me just mention one more. World events are under his control. Look at the fifth verse “Look among the nations, observe, be astonished, wonder because I am doing something in your days.” History follows a divine plan. History follows a divine time table. He works all things according to the counsel of his own will. So that all of the things that happen in human history they are not accidents, not any of them are accidents. It’s not an accident that that peanut farmer is going to Washington, sit in the White House. That’s right, it’s not an accident. It’s not an accident that grits is going to become popular. I mention to the ladies who work in the tape class this morning that I understand that some Yankee went into one of our Southern stores and ordered a grit. [Laughter] That’s close to being an accident. World events are under the control of the Lord. Someone has said “Make you plans with a pencil so that God can rub them out.”

Well our time is up and we must stop to give you a chance for a little break. We will pick up our story of Habakkuk here in our next study.

Let’s close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for this great prophet and for the lessons that we learned from him. And we pray that we may heed the greatest lesson that Thou hast worked in accordance with Thy word.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.